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PERSONALITY FACTORS WHICH MAY INTERFERE WITH THE LEARNING OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS.

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TO UNDERSTAND BETTER THE LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED ADULTS AND TO STUDY THE EMOTIONAL FACTORS COMMONLY OBSERVED AMONG THIS POPULATION WHICH APPEAR TO INHIBIT PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING, THE LITERATURE IN SEVERAL AREAS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH WAS SURVEYED. IN THIS PAPER THE RESEARCHERS (1) EXAMINE THE CONCEPT OF SELF AS IT PERTAINS TO THE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENT, (2) REVIEW ROKEACH'S HYPOTHESIS OF THE CLOSED BELIEF-DISBELIEF SYSTEM IN AN EFFORT TO RELATE IT TO THE EMOTIONAL MAKE-UP OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS, (3) DESCRIBE THE "CLOSED" SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT WHICH GIVES RISE TO THE PHENOMENON OF THE "CLOSED" MIND, AND (4) IDENTIFY SOME OF THE PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENT WHICH INTERFERE WITH HIS POTENTIAL AS A LEARNER. IN ADDITION TO OVERCOMING SUCH PERSONALITY FACTORS AS ALIENATION, AVOIDANCE, HOSTILITY TOWARD AUTHORITY, WITHDRAWAL, VIOLENT AGGRESSION, FEAR OF SCHOOLS, SELF-IMAGE AS AN ILLITERATE, REJECTION OF THE DESIRE TO DEVELOP INTELLECTUALLY, MENTAL BLOCKS AGAINST THE WORLD, AND RIGID VALUE SYSTEMS, THE ILLITERATE MUST BREAK OUT OF A SLOUGH OF DEFEAT AND DESPAIR IF HE IS TO ACHIEVE. (THERE IS A BIBLIOGRAPHY.) (AJ)

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Personality Factors Which May Interfere With The Learning of Adult Basic Education Students

Since Socrates' time teachers have been increasingly aware that students bring far more to the classroom than their mere physical presence. Very often they bring hierarchies of emotion and experience which can inhibit or materially affect in many ways the social interaction and climate for learning within the classroom milieu.

In an effort to better understand the learning characteristics of culturally disadvantaged adults, and more particularly to study certain emotions, or emotional factors, commonly observed among this population and which appear to inhibit both participation in organized educational activities as well as learning, we have surveyed the literature in several areas of psychological research. In the course of this survey we have endeavored to:

1. Examine the concept of Self, as it may pertain to the adult basic education student.

2. Review Rokeach's hypothesis of the Closed Belief-Disbelief System in an effort to relate it to the emotional make-up of adult basic education students.

3. Describe the "Closed" social environment which may give rise to the phenomenon of the "Closed" mind.

4. Identify some of the personality characteristics of the adult

basic education student which may interfere, in some discrete manner, with his potential as a learner.

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The Concept of Self

A man's Self, his "Phenomenal" or "Unique" Self, is the hidden key to his learning behavior, and is formed through his internalization of what he thinks others think of him. This concept has been developed and elaborated upon by several authorities, including Combs and Snygg, Brookover, Sullivan, Jackson, William James, and Arthur Jersild. In the main, their theories postulate that what a person thinks and how he behaves are largely determined by the concepts he holds about himself and about his abilities. Combs and Snygg feel that people act in any situation as a function of how they perceive themselves and how they perceive the situation.[1] Sullivan says opinions of Self are formed through "reflected appraisals," inferences about ourselves made as a consequence of the ways we perceive others behaving toward us.[2] Thus, if an individual feels that other people consider him to be a trusting, honest person, he will view the world as a trusting, to-be-trusted place, and honest; on the other hand, if he feels that other people hate him or are hostile to him, he will internalize these perceptions and come to create a Self that views the world as hateful and hostile.

Jersild holds with William James that the Self is "the sum total of all that a man can call his."[3] Jersild, however, elaborates the Self concept as:

> . . . a composite of thoughts and feelings which constitute a person's awareness of his individual existence. The Self includes, among other things, a system of ideas, attitudes, values, and

> commitments in an inner world. The Self is the nucleus of personality . . .[4] The Self is a person's total subjective environment.[5]

These definitions and explanations of self are of vital concern in the field of education, particularly the areas of literacy education and adult basic education. Brookover, et al., report that there is a significant positive correlation between self-concept and performance in the academic role, and that self-concept is "positively and significantly correlated with the perceived evaluations that significant others hold of the student."[6]

Brookover's findings are supported by Max Bruch et al., who write that

> Educators have begun to share with clinicians the assumption that relationships exist between certain facets or components of personality and specific abilities, and have operated on this assumption.[7]

Bruch found that there is a positive relationship between educational disability and immature self-concept.

Possibly most germane to a discussion of personality factors indicative of the "Closed Mind" of the adult basic learner is the evidence offered by Landsman. Landsman traces the investigations of behavioral scientists in education who proceed, he says, along two major paths: the Atomistic path, as in programmed learning, from Parts to Wholes; and the Learner or Self-Concept path in which the Learner is viewed as a self-perceiver as he encounters learning tasks. Landsman writes:

> It (The Self) is the central aspect of personality, consisting of a number of organized, defined objects or ideas, each with a corresponding attitude indicating its adequacy in the eyes of the person who is literally looking at himself and judging himself. Learning of the (Learner) is determined, influenced, distorted by the (Learner's) view of Self.[8]

Landsman feels that all learning is internalized more rapidly as it is perceived positively to The Learner's aspects of Self; and that learning which is related to negative aspects of Self is pushed away, avoided, rejected, and only rarely internalized.

Landsman defines a well-adjusted person as the Open Self, a man who is free of his past, free of forgotten traumas, free of threatening groups. A well-adjusted person is an effective person, a being capable of approaching new ideas with enthusiasm, and fearing neither failure nor embarrassment.

But the Closed Self, Landsman says, is constricted, rejecting, fearful of anything new, anticipating failure, and avoiding new experiences. Landsman states:

> A series of threatening, frightening school years constricts and closes the self, develops feelings of self-worthlessness and continues the vicious circle of avoidance of learning.[10]

Thus it appears important that individuals come to possess what Landsman calls an "Open Mind," because people learn only because they have found that learning has personal value for them. Fernald says, "The greatest handicap to the non-reader is the complex which accompanies it."[11] She feels that the Closed Mind is caused by "calling attention to the emotionally loaded situation in the classroom; teaching through the use of methods by which the student cannot learn, and by pointing out only the failures, not the successes of the student."[12]

That the Open Mind may welcome the learning effort, and the Closed Mind may interfere with the learning process may now appear apparent. Such being the case, let us look more fully into the concept of the Closed Mind, which would appear to hold much relevance to the learning difficulties of the culturally disadvantaged. In our attempt to further analyze this concept we shall rely, for the most part, upon Rokeach's work in this field.

The Closed Belief - Disbelief System

Milton Rokeach, major proponent of the Open and Closed-Mind hypothesis, feels that there are Closed Minds in all realms of human effort: politics, religion, the academics of science, philosophy, and even humanistic thought.[13] According to Rokeach, the Closed Mind persists in a form of idealogical dogmatism, "a closed way of thinking which could be associated with any ideology regardless of content, an authoritarian outlook on life, an intolerance toward those with opposing beliefs, and a sufferance of those with similar beliefs."[14]

According to Rokeach's thesis, the human mind contains a belief system which represents all the beliefs, sets, expectancies that a person at any given time accepts as true; and a disbelief system, composed of a series of subsystems, disbeliefs, sets, and expectancies, which a person at any given time rejects as false. Rokeach has promulgated certain characteristics of the Closed Belief-Disbelief System, several of which are listed below because they are particularly relevant to a discussion of the learning potential of the culturally disadvantaged:

1. The specific content of primitive beliefs is to the effect that the world one lives in is a threatening one.

2. The formal content of beliefs about authority and about people who hold to systems of authority is to the effect that authority is absolute, and that people are to be accepted and rejected according to their agreement or disagreement with such authority.

3. The structure of beliefs and disbeliefs perceived to emanate from authority is such that its substructures are in relative isolation with each other.[15]

In Rokeach's description of the Closed Mind, given above, we can find several meaningful implications for adult basic education, which shall be elaborated upon later. Also germane to the possibility that the Closed-Mind in the adult basic learner inhibits his learning is Rokeach's hypothesis that all belief-disbelief systems serve two conflicting sets of motives:

1. The need for a cognitive framework to know and to understand (which, if stronger than other needs, results in the Open Mind.)

2. The need to ward off threatening aspects of reality, (which, if stronger than other needs, results in the Closed Mind.)[16] Rokeach states:

> To varying degrees, individuals may become disposed to accept or to form closed systems of thinking and believing in proportion to the degree to which they are made to feel alone, isolated and helpless in the world in which they live, and thus anxious of what the future holds in store. These closed systems lead to feelings of guilt, and a disaffected outlook on life. The persons over-identify with absolute authority to defend Self from aloneness, isolation, self-hate and misanthropy.[17]

In essence, therefore, the Closed Mind is a system of cognitive defenses against the pain of anxiety; it gives rise to the preparation of defense mechanisms of repression, rationalization, denial, projection, reaction

formation, and over-identification. Would not the erection of a system of cognitive defenses against anxiety be common to a sub-culture and to a people which feels rejected and deprived by the rest of society? If we lend credence to Rokeach's thesis about the Closed Mind, we may be able to investigate one of the environments in which the Closed Mind phenomenon occurs, an environment which is of paramount pertinence to the field of literacy teaching.

The Social Environment

In the world of 1967, the United States contains some 25,000,000 educationally disadvantaged persons who lead a marginal economic existence because they cannot read nor write nor communicate well enough to earn an adequate income.[18] Most of these reside in urban areas, a result of the increasing migration of rural and farm populations to the city. Here, in enclaves which Mumford depicts as rife with "dehumanized, purposeless materialism, seamy political life, uncontrolled technology, deteriorating slums, ignorance, tensions and frustrations,"[19] "appalling numbers of Americans live in isolated status in a society with a total absence of positive stimulation: sensory, motor, mental or emotional. Exposed to terrifying experiences and distorting influences, they meet people whose standards are impressively higher, and a sense of paralyzing inadequacy ensues."[20]

In the world of the ghetto, just as in the culturally deprived rural areas where the frantic life of Megopolis has not yet intruded, the homes of

the culturally deprived, illiterate-to-be, and of the illiterate are "crowded with people but barren of objects."[21] In these homes, where 25,000,000 Americans morosely pursue their sunless existence, several generations may live together, each generation contributing what little economic means it has to support the whole. Constantly on the move, the families lose their identities in the crowds, their living quarters deteriorating with each move from farm to city, from ghetto to city neighborhood, and so on.

Because the home is unattractive, and filled with noise of quarrels, nagging, and worrisome verbalizations, the illiterates-to-be eke out an emotional existence in the streets. The father who bids the offspring farewell in the morning may not be the same "father" who greets the child at night. And with the arrival and departure of each new "father," the mother's personality changes to adapt to the new sexual environment. As "fathers" come and go, as the mother's emotional reserves strain to meet the demands of husband and children, the emotional networks of the incipient illiterate receive, in turn, a thorough going-over; the screening function of their nervous systems is ultimately exhausted, their goals are distorted or lost, and the desire for cognitive activity disappears.[22]

This tragic awareness of family conflict, taken into the schools, leads to chronic interference with formal thought processes because there is a specific and a general relationship between family setting and the child's cognitive processes. As his emotional burdens interfere each hour with his social interactions with the world about him, the illiterate-to-be begins to

construct, single-mindedly, a value system, as related to Self, that is distorted and unreal;[23] and the pnenomena of the Closed Mind, as Fernald shows, begins to shelter the personality from the threatening world.[24]

Tracing a second origin of the Closed Mind in the ghetto, Frenckel-Brunswich (as quoted in Rokeach) maintains that the Closed Mind is conceived in emotional

> ambivalence and the role it plays in the development of the child's personality structure. As a result of early parent child relationships involving varying degrees of permissiveness or punitiveness there emerge individual differences in the ability to tolerate emotional ambivalence toward parents, which in turn, spill over into social and cognitive spheres as well. Thus, a person who, through punishment, is not permitted to express his normal ambivalent feelings toward his parents develops a generalized need to structure his world rigidly, a pervasive tendency to permature closure, and a general intolerance of cognitive ambiguity. Such a Closed Mind is equally evident in sterotyped social attitudes toward minority groups, and in restricted and ineffective cognitive functioning.[25]

From the studies and writings of Mumford, Riese and Frenckel-Brunswich, we have been able to describe briefly the socio-economic origins of the Closed Mind, and of the culturally disadvantaged. Are we now able to establish a linkage between lower socio-economic status and Closed-Mindism or dogmatism?

Of key importance is establishing the relationship of lower socio-economic status to dogmatism is Robert M. Frumkin's investigation of dogmatism, social class values, and academic achievement. Frumkin shows that persons of lower socio-economic status are more dogmatic than

high-status persons.[26] Economic values dominate the lower class, Frumkin finds, and these persons tend to avoid problems in which highly abstract behavior is required.

How can the value dominances of the lower class be related to their relatively higher dogmatism? Frumkin maintains that part of the explanation is due to the intellectual orientation which dominates the lower-class individual. He tends to accept or reject the status quo on the basis of dogma he agrees with or disagrees with, but rarely in terms of scientific and critical examination. In fact, Frumkin feels that the lower-class person has very little real appreciation of what is involved in the scientific method of critical thinking. This is due, in part, to the passive economic and intellectual role required of the lower-class individual.

Frumkin concludes his interesting study with the optimistic observation that "education can help people become less dogmatic, because dogmatism is a function of the level of education: the higher a person advances within the educational complex, the less dogmatic he becomes."[27] From this it logically follows that education, by helping to decrease dogmatism in individuals, is aiding one of the most important aims of our democratically oriented society; namely, the creation of the kind of citizen who is more likely to act upon the basis of reason and critical thinking than upon impulse, emotion and blind acceptance of dogma.

However, Frumkin warns that:

> Low socio-economic status,...has the effect of maintaining dogmatism in disprivileged groups by preventing the development of the attitudes and opportunities necessary to achieve the critical intelligence needed to reduce dogmatism and achieve some measure of objectivity.[28]

It would seem apparent from the evidence offered above that, for diverse reasons, dogmatism is common to ghetto areas and to persons in the lower socio-economic classes. Yet what assurance does the educator have that dogmatism in the student personality is related in any way to the amount he learns? Several investigations cited below may provide a partial answer.

Howard J. Ehrlich studied the validity of certain aspects of the construct of dogmatism in an attempt to demonstrate the role of personality factors in a learning situation.[29] Ehrlich felt that persons who were high in dogmatism should exhibit less learning in a classroom situation than those who were low in dogmatism. In his tests of learning in the classroom, Ehrlich showed that dogmatism is inversely related to degree of learning, and that the relationship is independent of academic aptitude. Ehrlich recommends, because his results have deep significance for educators and education, that further study be conducted into the phenomenon. Unfortunately, however, the validity of Ehrlich's conclusions has not been substantiated by subsequent tests; Christensen duplicated Ehrlich's classroom tests, but obtained only null results.[30] Further research in this area appears warranted, as Ehrlich indicates.

In a second study, Black indicates that the culturally disadvantaged traditionally are..."inflexible, not open to reason about morality, diet, their family polarity, and educational practices..." Black cites a number of additional traits of the culturally disadvantaged, emphasizing their attitudes of "alienation," and their tendence to "learn through physical, concrete tasks." Black's study is significant because contemporary educational practice for the culturally disadvantaged and the illiterate is oriented very largely upon the student's ability to grasp abstract, not concrete, concepts.[31]

In the Review of Educational Research, Philip W. Jackson and Nina Strattner describe the reasons for unexplained variances in learning outcomes which linger after the effects of ability, prior learning, teaching methods and other task related variables have been removed.[32] Their description reveals that:

1. Learning effectiveness is impaired by various forms of psychological pathology;

2. Membership in a socially deprived group or in a stressful family environment creates a threatening situation for them under classroom conditions;

3. Learning effectiveness is enhanced by the possession of particular psychological strengths such as positive attitudes toward school, realistic achievement goals, and feelings of self-confidence.

Meaningful learning, Jackson and Strattner feel, usually requires sustained attention and willingness to modify previous beliefs. Therefore, any type of psychological disturbance that might reduce the learner's awareness or prevent him from accepting new knowledge would be expected to lower the efficiency of his performance. Two classes of conditions are most closely related to these specific effects: The first includes anxiety and related emotions; the second includes authoritarianism and other forms of closed belief systems.

Thus, in summary, the dogmatism of the low socio-economic peoples may represent an inhibitory factor to learning; and may well inhibit the learning response of the culturally disadvantaged and the illiterate. Perhaps, at this time, we can ascertain in what ways dogmatism may interfere with learning.

Personality Characteristics and Learning

As we survey the literature on dogmatism, and on Open and Closed Belief-Disbelief Systems, let us consider the personality characteristics of the adult basic education student, which may inhibit or interfere with his learning.

One consideration regarding individuals whose Closed Mind contributes to their illiteracy is the fact that such persons feel that they are being manipulated or victimized by forces beyond their control. Such people, those who feel that their own efforts to have little to do with the good or bad fortune that befalls them, are described as "alienated."[33] Jackson

maintains that the feeling of alienation is directly and importantly related to learning variables, and to the social experience of the learner.

As Jackson indicates, the sense of alienation is common to all persons whose social contacts with the outside world have caused them to create Self-images in which are contained beliefs that they cannot exert control over life's factors, a Self image that is passive, and incapable of reacting to the "slings and arrows of outraged fortune."

Jackson maintains that alienation, as a personality characteristic, --and as a breeding ground for dogmatic, Closed-Mind tendencies-- arises in a unique personal history, a history of deprivation, economic and physiological starvation, and emotional storm; in a loss of personal power within the school situation, and finally, within the home, where no emotional support, overt or covert, is rendered to the values constructed in the schools.

Alienation, so typical of the ghettos of our major cities, exists at four levels:

1. First Level, in which the person feels unable to control facilities and environment.

2. Second Level, in which the person no longer feels a need to adhere to society's expectations. At the Second Level, presumably, delinquency begins: the hub-cap stealing, the gasoline station shake-down.

3. Third Level, in which the person refuses to conform to the rules and regulations by which goals are achieved. At this stage, it

appears, the youthful criminality begins to harden; the goals and hopes of earlier years fade rapidly away.

4. Fourth Level, in which the person rejects or fails to develop a commitment to one or more fundamental values of his society.

As the culturally disadvantaged "progress" from one level to the next higher, the tendency to minimize and defame school values, and to "close" the mind against the school, against education, and against educational and societal goals grows greater and greater. Perhaps in the area of alienation lie the greatest socio-intellectual challenges of our times.[34]

In a second study of alienation Seeman and Evans found that a person's sense of alienation or powerlessness is a factor which affects his response to critical circumstances in his career.[35] In their studies of male tuberculosis patients, Seeman and Evans rated their subjects with an alienation scale that purported to assess a set of expectations for "little control over events." Their results show that patients high in alienation had not learned so much about their illness and about the hospital and hospital life and work as those with low alienation scores. Their data would seem to mean that people who are oriented by luck or fate tend to be passive and yielding to the on-rush of life, - as do the culturally deprived - and that those persons who seek out information are behaving as though they can control events through knowledge, - as do the middle and upper classes.

A second personality characteristic of the adult basic learner that might interfere with his learning is dealt with in Dollard-Miller's hypothesis concerning "Gradients of Approach and Avoidance." Dollard and Miller maintain that the tendency of an individual to avoid a feared stimulus -- in this case, an education, or the schools -- is stronger the closer the individual is to it.[36] This would account for the fact that in our current efforts to bring education to the nation's illiterates, and to enroll the culturally disadvantaged in basic education programs we often encounter strong and even violent resistance.

A third personality characteristic of the adult basic education student may be contained in the "Hostility and Anxiety toward Authority" which Taylor finds is characteristic of the Low Achiever.

As Taylor states:

> The degree to which a student is able to control his anxiety is directly related to his level of achievement, and the student's ability to conform to and/or accept authority demands will determine the amount of academic success.[37]

The hostility exhibited by ghetto residents toward authority is legendary. In fact, a major change in curriculum content has been made in the Great Cities Schools Improvement Programs as educators attempt materially to change the adult basic learner's concepts of the policeman and the role of the law in contemporary society.[38]

The phenomenon of "withdrawal" may constitute a fourth symptom of the Closed Belief-Disbelief System of the adult basic learner. Erik Erikson attributes withdrawal to a sense of identity confusion. He

defines withdrawal as

> the excluding of all sense of social solidarity..and leading possibly to snobbish isolation which finds companions but no friends. Withdrawal, or the closing of the mind to certain unfavorable aspects of the environment, is an adaptation, a character deformation indication..a pathological process in the personality system.[39]

Erikson's definition seems to include some parts of Jackson's Alienation concept, and some facets of Freud's concept of rejection; and as such, appears to constitute a personality inhibition to learning.

Perhaps a sixth personality characteristic indicative of the Closed Mind of the adult basic learner may be found in Feshback and Singer's contention that individuals, when afraid--and members of the low socio-economic classes are reputedly afraid and anxious--tend to judge a stimulus person (the teacher) as fearful; and that instructions from persons in authority designed to inhibit their feelings tend to enhance this effect.[40] Thus, it would appear that the greater the effort exerted by the culturally deprived to approach the threatening school situation, the greater will be his fear of the threatening environment. Conversely, the greater effort exerted by the teacher or school authorities to bring education to the illiterate or to the low socio-economic class member, the more fearful the situation may seem to the prospective student.

Burt proposes a seventh personality characteristic of the adult illiterate: "The illiterate is convinced he cannot read. He exhibits continuous feelings of shyness and disability..."[41] Both of Burt's

observations as to the personality of the illiterate are excellent evidence of the Closed Belief-Disbelief Systems of illiterate individuals. Burt's idea suggests an adult illiterate as an individual who is "sold" on his own reading disability, a person whose mind refuses to believe he can read now or ever.

Complete rejection of the desire to develop intellectually may constitute an eighth personality characteristic of the Closed Mind in the adult illiterate. According to Burman, adults on the lower socio-economic levels, although they exhibit considerable interest in vocational training, have no interest whatsoever in intellectual development.[42] The rejection is an inevitable concomitant of years of emotional and economic deprivation, and of a lifetime of rejection failures in the schools.

Angelica Cass, an authority in the field of literacy training and the author of a number of widely accepted literacy treatises, feels that adult illiterates, in common, exhibit a spectrum of characteristics, the greater number of which are evidence of a Closed Belief-Disbelief system that could interfere with new learning activities. Among them, Cass lists extreme sensitivity, diffidence, feelings of frustration and futility, resistance to knowledge, awkward mental attack, inhibited approach to social interactions, and "mental blocks" against the world.[43]

Additional evidence supporting the hypothesis that adult basic education students exhibit aspects of the Closed Mind is Wolfe's statement that "illiterates throughout the Great Cities Project needed to have

rigid value systems changed."

Conclusions

In summary, the literature appears to substantiate the belief that there are many personality factors, or characteristics, which may tend to interfere with the learning of adult basic education students. Among these we might include: alienation, avoidance, hostility toward authority, withdrawal, violent aggression, fear of schools, self-image as an illiterate, rejection of the desire to develop intellectually, mental blocks against the world, rigid value systems, and others.

Though the literature is voluminous on the subject, the personality factors inherent in the Open-Closed Mind phenomenon are not the only inhibitors in the illiterate's struggle to obtain an education. In a world he did not make, the illiterate must break out of a caul of defeat, desperation and despair if he is to achieve. This caul is compounded of parental failures, societal failures, and the failures of history. The causes of his illiteracy are as numberless as the paving stones of the streets he calls home.

When the nation undertakes to bring education to its culturally deprived, it undertakes a staggering task. This task will require a high degree of commitment, and educators must bring new weapons, new resources and new approaches to fight the Closed Mind--a prime source of the culturally deprived person's resistance to learning.

Only through an expanded national effort, combined with the carefully planned, imaginative use of the new approaches to the teaching task, can the war against adult illiteracy be won!

FOOTNOTES

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